

Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT)



What is ECT (Electro-Convulsive Therapy)?

ECT is a medical procedure performed under general anaesthesia with muscle relaxation, inducing a modified seizure by applying brief electrical currents through the brain. Evidence based advances in ECT ensure selective and individual delivery of treatment, and enable ECT to be used as effective relapse prevention.

Why has ECT been recommended for me?

ECT is recommended for many reasons, but most commonly used to treat severe depression, mania or psychosis. It may be recommended when:

- medication has not been effective in managing symptoms
- your mental illness is too severe to wait for other treatments to work
- other treatments have caused side effects, or cannot be used safely due to other medical complications
- ECT has been helpful for you in the past.

If you are not sure why you are being given ECT, please speak to your psychiatrist. Your psychiatrist, nurse or ECT Co-ordinator are available for you to speak to should you have any questions.

How does ECT work?

During ECT, a small amount of electric current is sent to the brain. The current produces a seizure which affects the entire brain, including the centres which control thinking, mood, appetite and sleep. Be assured, ECT does not cause any structural damage to the brain. It is the seizure itself which is believed to be therapeutic. Repeated treatments alter chemical messages in the brain that helps you begin to recover from your illness.

How well does ECT work?

Evidence shows that ECT may work faster than other treatments including medication, for people who are severely depressed, have difficulty eating, communicating, and slower thought process such as thinking, speech and movement.

Some people who have responded to ECT report it makes them feel "like themselves again" and "as if life were worth living again". Most patients recover their ability to work and/or lead a productive life after their depression has been treated with a course of ECT.

Do I have to stay in hospital whilst having a course of ECT?

No, not necessarily.

Whether you require full admission to hospital or can have ECT as an outpatient depends on your circumstances and individual needs as discussed with your doctor. If you are having ECT whilst an outpatient you will need to be brought to Pinelodge Clinic by a friend, relative or by taxi. Driving a car is not permitted after an anaesthetic or ECT treatment...so you will need to arrange transport home.

How often do I have treatment?

Every treatment plan is individual and depends on your circumstances. An in-hospital acute course commences with 3 treatments per week. Out patient maintenance ECT is assessed after each treatment, and continuation of care is a joint decision between yourself and your treating team.

How do you know if I am fit for an anaesthetic?

All inpatients are given a full physical examination by one of the hospital's General Practitioners. On admission you may be required to have blood tests, ECG, Chest Xray or CT scan.

Outpatients will be required to see their own GP for fitness as advised by the treating ECT team.

Can my family member/friend stay with me?

Yes. You may have a family member or friend sit with you until it is time for your treatment, dependant on any hospital restrictions (for example, Covid visitor restrictions) However, carers are not able to come into the treatment room while ECT is in progress.

What actually happens when I have ECT?

Because ECT is given under a general anaesthetic it is important for you to have nothing to eat or drink 6 hours prior to treatment. Your usual morning medication will be discussed with you, and if possible, shall be withheld until after treatment.

You remain in your clothes during the procedure, so it is advisable to wear something in which you feel comfortable, like a track suit or loose clothing.

Once you are taken into the ECT Suite you will be asked to lie on the treatment bed. The nurse will attach a ECG dots, and EEG dots on your forehead and behind your ears (to monitor your brain wave activity). Your blood pressure, oxygen levels and pulse will also be taken. You will also be given oxygen via a mask.

The anaesthetist will insert a cannula so that you can be given your short anaesthetic and muscle relaxant. This ensures you are unaware of the procedure, and cause your muscles to relax completely. Once you are asleep the doctor will place the ECT pads on the sides of your head. On the first occasion the treatment is individually adjusted so it is right for you. The ECT Co-ordinator will speak to you about this process.

The small electrical current is passed briefly across the ECT pads and causes a mild fit in the brain. There is little movement of your body because of the muscle relaxant. The seizure is usually under 30 seconds, and closely monitored and recorded throughout. Once the seizure is over, monitoring continues until you are fully awake.

How do I feel when I wake up?

Some people wake up with no side effects at all and simply feel relaxed. Others may feel somewhat confused or have a headache. Often people tend to feel some physical effects after their first treatment only.

There will be a recovery nurse with you when you wake up to offer you reassurance and make you feel as comfortable as possible.

Once you are wide awake you will be offered breakfast, and given your morning medication as prescribed.

Can I smoke before having ECT?

Smoking prior to ECT is a risk. Your smoking status will be ascertained and recorded prior to treatment. You will be asked not to smoke for 8 hours prior to treatment. If you are a smoker, you will be asked to co-operate with our clinical caregivers to take some practical measures to reduce risk.

How long is a course of ECT?

An acute course of ECT is 6 treatments. It can be offered 3 times a week. It is not possible to say exactly how many treatments you will need, it may be more, or less. It is recommended you remain an inpatient during an acute course to allow your treating team to review and discuss your progress with you.

Outpatient ECT treatment is an option post your acute course. It is offered weekly, fortnightly, monthly or longer still – treatment options are done in consultation with your treating team.

What are the side effects of ECT?

Some patients may be confused just after they wake up from the treatment. However, this generally clears up within a few hours. For a small number of patients this confusion can persist for the short term affecting the memory of recent events or names of people you may of just met. Usually this clears up within days to a few weeks of finishing a course of ECT. ECT does not have any long-term effects on your memory, cognitive ability or your intelligence.

Are there any serious risks from the treatment?

ECT is among the safest medical treatments given under general anaesthesia. The risk of death or serious injury with ECT is slight. For example, much lower than that reported for childbirth, and is about the same as for wisdom teeth extraction. If you have cardiac defibrillators or pacemakers it is still possible for you to have ECT safely.

Your doctor will speak to you about your medical history, and involve other specialists as required.

Consent

Prior to ECT you will be asked to sign a consent form for ECT. Before you sign the form your doctor will explain what the treatment involves, why it is a treatment of choice for you, risks and benefits associated with ECT, and they must answer any questions you may have.

The consent form is not a binding document and does not commit you to have the treatment. You can withdraw consent at any time during your treatment.

Can I be given ECT against my will?

At Langmore Centre, ECT is administered on a voluntary basis, no one can be given ECT against their will.

What about when it is time to go home after ECT?

As inpatients, the treating team will work with you and develop an outpatient continuation or maintenance treatment with options best suited to maintain your mental wellness.

As an outpatient, prior to leaving Langmore Centre you will be reviewed and medically cleared by a doctor. As you have had an anaesthetic, it is advised you to have someone with you for the next 24 hours.

What if I have a cold or am unwell of day of treatment?

If you develop symptoms of a physical illness during the course of ECT, you should notify your doctor before your next treatment.

Do I keep taking my medication during ECT?

You should discuss this with your psychiatrist prior to starting ECT. Some medications are continued throughout the course while others may be temporarily withheld.

What next?

During the course of ECT you will regularly be reviewed by your psychiatrist. With you, they will determine the effectiveness of the ECT treatment. This will help decide the number of treatments required. Remember, questions about your treatment are always important and welcomed.

Things to remember

- ECT is a safe and effective treatment
- ECT treatment is a collaboration between yourself and your treatment team. We work with you to get the best possible outcome to promote and maintain your mental wellness.

